

ANTHROPOLOGY

and

IMPERIALISM



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ANTHROPOLOGY AND IMPERIALISM NEW PROPOSALS FOR ANTHROPOLOGISTS *

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Recently a number of anthropologists and anthropology students have complained that cultural and social anthropology are failing to tackle significant problems of the modern world. As I have thought this for some time, I should like to make a tentative statement about where I think we stand today, and to follow it with some proposals. This being a new departure, I must ask to be excused if I am both obvious and argumentative.

Anthropology is a child of western imperialism. It has roots in the humanist visions of the Enlightenment, but as a university discipline and a modern science, it came into its own in the last decades of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. This was the period in which the western nations were making their final push to bring practically the whole pre-industrial non-western world under their political and economic control.

Until World War II most of our fieldwork was carried out in societies that had been conquered by our own governments. We tended to accept the imperialist framework as given, perhaps partly because we were influenced by the dominant ideas of our time, and partly because at that time there was little anyone could do to dismantle the empires. In spite of some belief in value-free social science, anthropologists in those days seem to have commonly played roles characteristic of white liberals in other spheres of our society, sometimes of white liberal reformers. Anthropologists were of higher social status than their informants, of the dominant race, and protected by imperial law; yet, living close to the natives, they tended to take their part and to try to protect them against the worst forms of imperialist exploitation. Customary relations developed between the anthropologist and the government or the various private agencies who funded and protected him; other types of customary relationships grew up between anthropologists and the people whose institutions they studied. Applied anthropology developed as a kind of social work and community development effort for non-white peoples, whose future was seen in terms of gradual education, and of amelioration of conditions many of which had actually been imposed by their western conquerors in the first place.

STUDYING COMMUNIST SOCIETIES

Since World War II, a new situation has come about. There are today some 2,352 million people in underdeveloped nations.¹ About 773 million of them, or one third, have already, through revolution, passed out of the sphere of western imperialism into the new Communist states of China, Mongolia, North Korea, North Vietnam and Cuba. However arduous and conflictful their conditions, they are now beyond the domination of the capitalist powers and are off on tracks of their own. Because of the Cold War, American anthropologists are unable to study these societies directly, and have made few comparisons of their political economies or community structures with those of non-Communist underdeveloped nations. When American studies of Communist societies are made, I would argue that the built-in assumption that Communism, especially revolutionary Communism, is bad and unviable commonly produces distortions of both theory and fact. Granting the difficulties of obtaining reliable information, I believe that more objective studies could be made if attention were paid to the work of the few Western social scientists who have lived in these countries, for example Owen Lattimore, Joan Robinson, Jan Myrdal and David and Isabel Crook. In addition to primary sources from the Communist nations there are also, of course, the writings of western journalists and others who have lived or travelled in the new Communist countries since their revolutions. Examples are Rene Dumont, Stuart and Roma Gelder, Felix Greene, Edgar Snow, William Hinton, Han Suyin, Anna Louise Strong, Wilfred Burchett, Charles Taylor and many others. Most of these writers are favorable to the newer communisms, and most tend to be neglected or scoffed at in the United States. Yet American social scientists think nothing of using travellers' reports to eke out their knowledge of non-western societies of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, biased or mission-oriented though some of them may have been. Certainly such studies are not discarded on the grounds that their authors happened to like the societies they studied. There is no reason why anthropologists cannot employ similar criteria of objectivity to modern writers who admire China or other Communist countries today.

* Paper delivered at the Southwestern branch of the American Anthropological Association meetings, March 1967, and broadcast on KPFA radio, California.

1. These and later figures are derived from United Nations totals of 1961, as provided in the World Almanac of 1967.

THE POOR COUNTRIES

There remain about 1,579 million people, or 67 percent of the total, in non-Communist non-western nations. Of these, 49 million, or 2 percent of the total, are still in more or less classical colonial societies such as South Africa, Mozambique or Angola, ruled by small white elites drawn from the 'mother country' or else now severed from it as separate settler populations. About another 511 million, or 22 percent of the total, live in what may be regarded as satellite or client states. The largest of these states, with populations of over 5 million, are Columbia, Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, Venezuela, the Philippines, South Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, the Congo, Nigeria, Iran, Southern Arabia, Cameroon and Turkey. The list is very tentative, for modern neo-imperialism varies in intensity. Some might include Mexico and Pakistan, bringing the total to 657 million, or 28 percent of the underdeveloped world. In all of these client states there are indigenous governments, but these tend to be so constrained by western military or economic aid that they have little autonomy. Most of their governments are opposed to social reforms and would probably collapse if western aid were withdrawn. About 318 million of these people, or 14 percent of the total, live in nations beholden to the United States, either in Latin America, the traditional preserve of US capital, or else in a fringe around China, where the US has established satellite regimes in an effort to stave off the spread of Communism. If we include Pakistan and Mexico, US client states amount to about 20 percent of the total.

The remaining 873 million, or 37 percent of the total, live in nations that are usually considered to be relatively independent, under governments containing popular nationalist leaders. Most of these leaders conducted nationalist struggles against European colonialism a decade or two ago, and some fought wars of liberation. By contrast, the governments of most of the client states were either installed by, or arose after military coups inspired from, the west. Most of the independent 'Third World' nations regard themselves as neutral and in some sense socialist. Because the appeal of their governments is of a multi-class character, Peter Worsley calls them 'populist.'² There is a public sector of the economy and an emphasis on national planning, as well as a large private sector dominated by foreign capital. The largest of these states, with populations over 5 million, are India, Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Nepal, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, the United Arab Republic, Algeria, Morocco, Kenya, Tanzania, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Ghana.

During the 1950's, many liberal social scientists and others hoped that these neutral nations would form a strong Third World that could act independently of either the western industrial or the Communist powers. I suggest that in the 1960's this hope has dimmed, and is now almost extinguished, chiefly because of the expansion of American capital and military power, the refusal of European nations to relinquish their own economic strongholds, and the failure of many new governments to improve the living conditions of their people. In the past fifteen years, at least 227 million people in 16 nations, or 10 percent of the underdeveloped world, have, after a longer or shorter period of relative independence, moved into, or moved back into, a client relationship, usually with the United States. These nations are Guatemala, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Trinidad and Tobago, South Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, the Congo, Togo and Gabon. In most of these countries the shift in orientation followed a military coup. A further 674 million in India, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Ceylon, Kenya and Ghana, which I have classified as 'independent,' have recently moved into much closer dependence on the United States, so that their future as independent nations is now uncertain. Together with the US's client states and colonial dependencies, this brings to 48 percent the total whose policies are very heavily swayed by the USA, and that is a conservative estimate.

Countering this re-imposition of western power, armed revolutionary movements now exist in at least 20 countries with a total population of 266 million. These countries are Guatemala, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, Paraguay, Brazil, Honduras, Bolivia, Columbia, Angola, Mozambique, the Congo, Cameroon, Portuguese Guinea, Yemen, Southern Arabia, the Philippines, Thailand, Laos and South Vietnam. About 501 million people live in 7 other countries where unarmed revolutionary movements or parties have considerable support, namely India, Rhodesia, Southwest Africa, South Africa, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and Panama. In more than one third of the underdeveloped world, therefore, revolution against both native elites and western dominance is a considered possibility, while in another third it has already been accomplished. Even in the remaining relatively stable colonial, client or neutral states, a majority of the people is getting poorer, and a small minority of rich is getting richer. Populations are increasing, discontent is widespread, and revolutionary struggles are quite possible within a decade or two.

Whereas in the fifties, it looked as though much of the non-western world might gain genuine political and economic independence of the west by peaceful means, this is no longer the case. Western dominance is continuing under new guises, even expanding and hardening. At the same time, revolution now begins to appear as the method by which underdeveloped societies may hope to gain freedom from western controls.

2. Peter Worsley, The Third World, pp. 118-174.

ANTHROPOLOGISTS' DILEMMA

In this revolutionary and proto-revolutionary world, anthropologists are beginning to be in difficulties. We are rapidly losing our customary relationships as white liberals between the conquerors and the colonized. From the beginning, we have inhabited a triple environment, involving first, loyalties to the peoples we studied, second, to our colleagues and our science, and third, to the powers who employed us in universities or who funded our research. In many cases we seem now to be in danger of being torn apart by the conflicts between the first and third set of loyalties. On the one hand, part of the non-western world is in revolt, especially against the American government as the strongest and most counter-revolutionary of the western powers. The war in Vietnam has, of course, exacerbated the non-western sense of outrage, although the actual governments of these nations are so dependent on the US that they soften their criticisms. On the other hand, anthropologists are becoming increasingly subject to restrictions, unethical temptations and political controls from the US government and its subordinate agencies, as Professor Ralph Boals' recent report to the American Anthropological Association on Problems of Anthropological Research and Ethics amply shows. The question tends to become: what does an anthropologist do who is dependent on a counter-revolutionary government, in an increasingly revolutionary world? To complicate matters, into the arena has stepped a fourth and most vociferous public, namely students, who once imbibed knowledge peaceably, but who are now, because of their own crises, asking awkward questions about ethics, commitments and goals.

There is little wonder that with all these demands many anthropologists bury themselves in their specialties, or, if they must go abroad, seek out the remotest, least unstable tribe or village they can find.

As Peter Worsley has recently pointed out, however, in a paper called 'The End of Anthropology?' we shall eventually have to choose either to remain, or become, specialists who confine themselves to the cultures of small-scale pre-industrial societies, or else, bringing to bear all our knowledge of cultural evolution and of primitive social institutions, embark fully on the study of modern societies, including modern revolutions. If we take the former path, as our subject matter disappears, we shall become historians, and will retreat from the substantial work we have already done in contemporary non-western societies. If we take the latter path, which is the one some of us must inevitably follow, we shall have to admit that our subject matter is increasingly the same as that of political scientists, economists and sociologists. The only way that we can not admit this is by confining ourselves to studies of small segments of modern society. But as the scale of these societies widens, such studies are less and less justifiable theoretically or methodologically except within a framework of understanding of what is happening to the larger system. Anthropologists have, moreover, some right to demand of themselves that they do study the larger system as a totality, for they have fifty years of experience of analysing the interconnectedness of political, economic and religious institutions within smaller-scale systems. While they must necessarily depend for much of their data on the other social sciences, anthropologists do have some historical claim to play a synthesizing role.

STUDYING IMPERIALISM

Unfortunately, we have I think a serious drawback in our own history which makes it very difficult for us to approach modern society as a single, interdependent world social system. This is that although we have worked for over a hundred years in conquered societies, and although for at least fifty of them we have emphasized the interconnectedness of parts of social systems, we have virtually failed to study western imperialism as a social system, or even adequately to explore the effects of imperialism on the societies we studied. Of late a few pioneer studies have appeared which attempt this task, notably Worsley's own book, The Third World. Wallerstein's collection, Social Change: The Colonial Situation also draws together useful extracts by social scientists and nationalist leaders over the past twenty years. Wolf's study of Mexico, Steward's of Puerto Rico, Epstein's of politics in the Zambian copper-belt, and Barnett's of Mau Mau also move in this general direction. But it is remarkable how few anthropologists have studied imperialism, especially its economic system.

There are of course already a large number of studies, indeed a whole literature, on western imperialism, most although not all by writers influenced by Marx. Lenin's Imperialism, Luxemburg's Accumulation of Capital, Hobson's and Moon's work on imperialism, Townsend's European Colonial Expansion Since 1871, Eric William's Capitalism and Slavery, Mukherjee's Rise and Fall of the East India Company, Sternberg's Capitalism and Socialism on Trial, and Baran's Political Economy of Growth are outstanding examples. More recent studies include, of course, Baran and Sweezy's Monopoly Capital, Nkrumah's Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism, Rene Dumont's Lands Alive and False Start in Africa, Fanon's Wretched of the Earth and Studies in a Dying Colonialism, and A. G. Frank's Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America. Such books tend in America to be either ignored or reviewed cursorily and then dismissed. They rarely appear in standard anthropological bibliographies. I can only say that this American rejection of Marxist and other 'rebel' literature, especially since the McCarthy period, strikes me as tragic.

The refusal to take seriously and to defend as intellectually respectable the theories and challenges of these writers has to a considerable extent deadened controversy in our subject, as well as ruining the careers of particular individuals. It is heartening that in recent years the publications of Monthly Review Press, the National Guardian and Studies on the Left, as well as other left-wing journals, have become a kind of underground literature for many graduate students and younger faculty in the social sciences. But both orthodox social science and these Marxist influenced studies suffer from the lack of open confrontation and argument between their proponents. There are of course political reasons for this state of affairs, stemming from our dependence on the powers, but it is unfortunate that we have allowed ourselves to become so subservient, to the detriment of our right of free enquiry and free speculation.

WHAT RESEARCH PROBLEMS?

I should like to suggest that some anthropologists who are interested in these matters could begin a work of synthesis by focusing on some of the contradictions between the assertions and theories of these non-American or Unamerican writers and those of orthodox American social scientists, and choosing research problems that might throw light on these contradictions. Among such problems might be the following.

1. Is it true, as Andre Gunder Frank argues from United Nations figures,³ that per capita food production in non-Communist Asia, Africa and Latin America has declined to below pre-war levels since 1960, whereas it has risen above pre-war levels in China and Cuba? Or is it generally true, as the American press asserts and many social scientists assume, that capitalist production in underdeveloped countries is poor, but Communist production is even poorer?

2. A set of research problems might be developed on the cooperative structure and efficiency of socialist and capitalist foreign aid. One might, for example, compare the scope and results of American economic and military aid to the Dominican Republic with those of Russian aid to Cuba. Although Americans cannot go freely to Cuba, it is conceivable that a European and an American, coordinating their research problems, might do such comparative work. In countries such as India, the UAR, or Algeria, comparable socialist and capitalist aid projects might be studied within the same locality.

3. We need comparative studies of types of modern inter-societal political and economic dominance, to define and refine such concepts as imperialism, neo-colonialism, etc. How, for example, does Russian power over one or another of the East European countries compare with that of the United States over certain Latin American or Southeast Asian countries, with respect to such variables as military coercion, the disposal of the subordinate society's economic surplus, and the relations between political elites? How does Chinese control over Tibet compare, structurally and functionally, with Indian control over Kashmir, Hyderabad or the Naga Hills, and what have been the effects of these controls on the class structures, economic productivity and local political institutions of these regions?

4. Comparative studies of revolutionary and proto-revolutionary movements are clearly desirable if we are to keep abreast with indigenous movements for social change. In spite of obvious difficulties, it is possible to study some revolutions after they have occurred, or to study revolts in their early stages or after they have been suppressed. There are, moreover, westerners who live and travel with revolutionary movements; why should anthropologists fight so shy of them? We need to know, for example, whether there is a common set of circumstances under which left wing and nationalist revolutions have occurred or have been attempted in recent years in Cuba, Algeria, Indo-China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Kenya and Zanzibar. Are there any recognizable shifts in ideology or organization between these earlier revolts and the guerrilla movements now taking shape in Guatemala, Venezuela, Columbia, Angola, Mozambique, Laos, Thailand, Cameroon, Yemen or Southern Arabia? What are the types of peasantry and urban workers most likely to be involved in these revolutions; are there typologies of leadership and organization? Why have some failed and others succeeded? How did it happen, for example, that some 800,000 communists and their families were killed last year in Indonesia with almost no indigenous resistance, and how does this affect the self-assessment and prospects of, say, the Left Communist Party in India?

I may be accused of asking for Project Camelot, but I am not. I am asking that we should do these studies in our way, as we would study a cargo-cult or kula-ring, without the built-in biases of trained financing, without the assumption that counter-revolution, and not revolution, is the best answer, and with the ultimate economic and spiritual welfare of our informants, and of the international community before us rather than the short-run military or industrial profits of the western nations. I would also ask that these studies be attempted by individuals or self-selected teams, rather than as part of the grand artifice of some externally stimulated master-plan. Perhaps what I am asking is not possible any more in America. I am concerned that it may not be, that Americans are already too compromised, too constrained by their

3. In 'Hunger' (Available from the Radical Education Project).

own imperial government. If that is so, the question really is how anthropologists can get back their freedom of enquiry and of action, and I suggest that, individually and collectively, we should place this first on the list.

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